DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 171 213 HE 011 293

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TITLE Sources of Information Upon Which to Base Evaluations of College Teaching.
INSTITUTION Kansas State Univ., Manhattan. Center for Faculty Evaluation and Development in Higher Education.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 24p.
AVAILABLE FROM Center for Faculty Evaluation and Development in Higher Education, 1627 Anderson Ave., Box 3000, Manhattan, Kansas 66502

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Classroom Observation Techniques; *College Faculty; *College Instruction; *Effective Teaching; *Evaluation Methods; Followup Studies; Higher Education; Peer Evaluation; Personnel Evaluation; Resource Guides; Self Evaluation; Student Evaluation; Student Evaluation of Teacher Performance; *Teacher Evaluation

ABSTRACT

The kinds of information that have been used in the past to evaluate the effectiveness of college teaching are briefly reviewed, and the advantages and disadvantages of eight sources that seem most useful for making such judgments are discussed. Possible sources of information for evaluating an instructor's teaching effectiveness are: classroom visitation; a course portfolio; long-term followup of students; measurement of student achievement; opinions of deans, department heads, and colleagues; self-evaluation; systematic student ratings; and academic advisement. Little importance should be attached to the following sources of information: enrollment in elective courses, grade distributions, informal student opinions, and scholarly research and publication. Since there is no single source of information that is acceptable for evaluating college teaching, it is strongly recommended that several sources be used to evaluate college teaching. These sources should be chosen so that in combination they provide accurate and valid information about all of the individual instructor's teaching responsibilities. Teaching responsibilities of most faculty members would seem to be adequately covered by using systematic student ratings, course portfolios, opinions of colleagues and department heads, and self-evaluation. (SW)

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SOURCES OF INFORMATION UPON WHICH TO BASE EVALUATIONS OF COLLEGE TEACHING

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HE011293

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ABSTRACT

SOURCES OF INFORMATION UPON WHICH TO BASE
EVALUATIONS OF COLLEGE TEACHING

This article briefly reviews the kinds of information that have been used in the past to evaluate the effectiveness of college teaching and then discusses the advantages and disadvantages of the eight sources which seem most useful for making such judgments. The article concludes by recommending that five of these sources be combined. These should cover the teaching responsibilities of most faculty members without requiring an excessive commitment of time.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION UPON WHICH TO BASE EVALUATIONS OF COLLEGE TEACHING

Faculty discussions about how to evaluate college teaching seem to follow a preordained path with the inexorableness of a Greek tragedy. Someone, a member of a faculty committee, an administrator, or a consultant, proposes one or more procedures to evaluate teaching, and then one or more faculty members raise objections to each and every procedure. There are, of course, objections to each and every procedure. Where the futility of the exercise lies is in its finale. The faculty adjourn with the feeling that the question of how to evaluate teaching has been answered; it cannot be evaluated.

Implicit in all of these debates seems to be the assumption that the issue is whether or not to evaluate teaching. Since there are no problem-free procedures available to evaluate teaching, obviously the answer is not to evaluate teaching.

I would like to suggest that the question is not, and never has been whether or not to evaluate teaching. In higher education we have always evaluated teaching, and, if anything, we are likely to do even more of this in the future. Whenever a decision is made concerning retention, promotion, tenure or salary increases, evaluations are being made. Even if the decision is to treat everyone the same, that is an evaluation. The fact that, in the past, such decisions may have been made informally and in private; that they may have been based upon what the department head overheard through an open classroom door, or upon the comments of a few disgruntled

students, made these decisions no less evaluative. The fact that very often the faculty member did not know what the decision was based upon does not seem to make such decisions any more acceptable.

This paper attempts to address this question: Given that college teaching will be evaluated, and that no completely acceptable procedures to do this are available, what are the alternatives that can be used to assess the teaching effectiveness of the individual instructor? This paper will not consider other areas of faculty responsibility, for example, research and service.

THE CRITERION PROBLEM

Basic to the whole issue of evaluating (and improving) college teaching is the question: What is effective teaching? Unfortunately, there is little agreement on the answer. The issue is further complicated by the fact that, ultimately, higher education should be interested in teaching only insofar as it fosters student learning, a distinction which is not always made. Discussions of college teaching and the curriculum frequently tend to confuse what is learned with what is taught.

Essentially, if the students are learning what the instructor is trying to teach them, one may say that the instructor is an effective teacher. This being the case, why do not colleges and universities stop evaluating teaching and focus on measuring student learning? At least two reasons come to mind. First, student learning is the result of the students' skills and efforts as well as of the instructor's skill and effort, but the instructor's evaluation should be based only upon the latter. Second, an institution can directly influence teaching by working with the faculty,

whereas its influence on student learning is only indirect because it works through the faculty.

For the purposes of this discussion, effective teaching will encompass all of those instructor behaviors which foster student learning of the teacher's and/or of the institution's educational objectives. (Ideally, the students will also share at least some of these objectives.) This paper will list the kinds of information which have been used in the past to evaluate college teaching, and describe some of the advantages and disadvantages of each. Using such sources of information, however, will not relieve evaluators of the necessity of making some final judgment based upon inferences concerning what the students have learned and the degree to which the teacher fostered that learning. But, it is hoped, using a variety of sources of information will enable evaluators to make more accurate and valid judgments, and therefore fairer evaluations.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Reporting on a study conducted in 1966, Gustad /3/ listed fifteen sources of information actually employed in the evaluation of teaching. The rankings for four-year colleges are listed below in the order of their use at that time (1966), the most frequently used is listed first:

1. Chairman evaluation
2. Dean evaluation
3. Colleagues' opinion
4. Scholarly research and publication
5. Informal student opinion

6. Grade distributions
7. Committee evaluations
8. Course syllabi and examinations
9. Student examination performance
10. Self-evaluation
11. Enrollment in elective courses
12. Systematic student ratings (tied with 13 and 14)
13. Alumni opinions (tied with 12 and 14)
14. Classroom visits (tied with 12 and 13)
15. Long-term follow-up of students

In a more recent study of practices in evaluating classroom teaching performance in liberal arts colleges, Seldin /10/ reported the frequency of use of the same fifteen sources of information:

1. Chairman evaluation (tied for 1st)
2. Dean evaluation (tied for 1st)
3. Committee evaluation
4. Colleagues' opinions
5. Systematic student ratings
6. Self-evaluation
7. Scholarly research and publication
8. Informal student opinions
9. Course syllabi and examinations
10. Classroom visits
11. Student examination performance

12. Enrollment in elective courses
13. Grade distribution
14. Long-term follow-up of students
15. Alumni opinions

In his book, Evaluating Faculty Performance, Miller [7] suggested using only four of these: classroom visits, course syllabi and examinations (which he called teaching materials and procedures), self-evaluation, and systematic student evaluation.

POSSIBLE SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Seven of these sources of information seem to be useful in evaluating an instructor's teaching effectiveness and so are recommended for consideration. In some cases these sources combine one or more of the fifteen sources studied by Gustad [3] and by Seldin [10].

Classroom Visitation. Typically this involves the observation of one class by the department head or a colleague.

Advantages.

1. The observation is made by someone knowledgeable in the field who can judge the comprehensiveness of the coverage, the currentness of the material, etc.

2. Such an observer can concentrate on the process of the teaching, that is, on the organization of the material, the kinds of transitions employed, and the like. The students are usually so concerned with learning the content that they have little time to concentrate on how it is being taught.

Disadvantages

1. To be reliable, this approach requires two or more visits by two or more persons; therefore, it is very expensive in terms of the faculty's and department head's time.

2. There is the question of what criteria the observers should use. Often visitors tend to judge another's teaching by how they would teach. This is an inappropriate criterion. One solution is to discuss with the instructor before the visit what he or she is trying to accomplish in that class. Some formal training of the observers is also helpful.

3. Many of these observations simply duplicate information available from systematic student ratings.

Course Portfolio. This portfolio would contain most or all of the materials which the instructor has developed to teach the course, for example, the course syllabus, papers or other assignments, bibliography, examinations, and quizzes. Ideally it would include a detailed description of the instructional objectives for the course. It should also contain information about student performance, possibly graded samples of student examinations or papers, or perhaps statistical data generated from computer-scored tests. The intent of the course portfolio is to provide data about the course which would give a reader a good idea of what went on in the course. Based upon this data, someone knowledgeable in the field could make a judgment concerning the effectiveness of the course.

Advantages

1. The portfolio makes use of data already available. This data can provide a rich source of information about the course, especially to someone knowledgeable in the field.

2. This information is usually not available from other sources.

Disadvantages

1. The portfolio might not be an accurate reflection of what actually went on in the class. It might represent the instructor's aspirations more than accomplishments, and it could be subject to some faking by the instructor.

2. It must be judged by several people to avoid subjectivity. As with classroom visits, a faculty evaluator may inappropriately use his or her personal teaching approach as the criterion to judge another's teaching effectiveness.

Long-Term Follow-Up of Students. This source would encompass any kind of follow-up of students after the course has been completed, including performance in later sequential courses, as well as the opinions of alumni. Such follow-ups provide data relevant to two widely held tenets in higher education: first, a belief held even in the face of contrary research evidence (for example, a study by Centra [1] that students often change their opinions about who were the "good" teachers after they get into the "real world"; and second, that the goal of preparing students for life or for a career cannot really be judged at the end of the course.

Advantages

1. The criteria used by the respondents tend to be more "true-to-life," more relevant to the goals of a college education.

2. Such long-term follow-ups can capitalize on the "wisdom-of-hindsight"; judgments can be based upon the respondents' actual experience rather than someone's guess about what learning may be meaningful after graduation.

Disadvantages

1. It is often difficult to determine which instructor influenced which outcome.

2. The criteria used by the respondents tend to be limited to those aspects of a course which they have found personally useful to date, neglecting what might be useful to others, or helpful later in their lives or careers.

3. Developing appropriate surveys, obtaining correct addresses, mailing the materials out (and usually sending a second mailing to those who fail to respond), represent a considerable effort of both time and money, often for limited returns.

Measurement of Student Achievement. This source is intended to include only those direct measurements of student achievement in which one may place confidence in both the reliability and validity of the measurement. Thus, it would exclude the usual course exam because most college teachers have limited expertise in educational measurement. Some possibly acceptable

measures might be those developed for so called criterion-referenced measurement, mastery or competency-based learning, and Keller plan or personalized system of instruction. All of these require considerable effort and knowledge in developing, first, appropriate instructional objectives; and second, reliable and valid measures of the students' achievement of those objectives.

Where appropriate standardized tests are available; these also might be used for this measurement.

Advantages

1. These sources attempt to measure the students' learning directly. They do not depend upon anyone's (students', colleagues', department head's) opinions of what the instructor's students are learning.

2. They provide detailed information concerning the instructional objectives, evaluation procedures, and student performance, all of which are useful data in their own right, independent of whether one subscribes to the philosophy of the instructor regarding the course.

Disadvantages

1. Such measurement, to be done properly, requires much more effort than is typically given to a course.

2. They require that some measure of student effort be included. Students may fail to learn because of deficiencies in their own behavior or attitude, not the instructor's. Conversely, students may learn despite the instructor.

3. There is the problem of comparability. How does one interpret, for example, acceptable performance in a freshman physical education course with acceptable performance in a graduate ancient literature seminar? (See Popham /9/ for further discussion.)

Opinions of Deans, Department Heads, Colleagues, etc. Only opinions formed exclusive of the other six sources of information should be included in this category. When opinions are based upon the other sources of information, the advantages and disadvantages of those sources pertain.

Because the other six sources of information refer primarily to classroom teaching, they leave many important aspects of teaching unassessed.

Advantages

1. These opinions provide information about aspects of teaching which may not be covered by other sources; for example, course revisions, curriculum development, service on departmental or other instructional committees, mastery of one's academic discipline, and the like.

2. Such opinions provide a broader view. Almost all faculty members have teaching obligations beyond the classroom. To restrict the evaluation of teaching only to classroom activities would be both inaccurate and unjust, especially to those who shoulder the full range of teaching responsibilities.

Disadvantages

1. These opinions are almost always based upon incomplete information and so tend to be subjective. One may place more reliance upon such opinions when there is a consensus; otherwise, these opinions should probably be given little weight.

2. Colleagues may be, in some sense, in competition with one another, for example, in institutions with tenure quotas or merit-pay systems. In such cases peer evaluations may be subject to conflicts of interest, that is, a positive evaluation of a colleague may lessen the chances for one's own tenure or salary increase.

Self Evaluation. The form which a self evaluation might take varies considerably. One possibility would be a detailed description of all of the individual's teaching responsibilities along with an indication by the individual of his or her judgment about how effectively each responsibility was fulfilled. These judgments should be accompanied by a detailed description of what the individual did which supports the judgment, as well as explanations of extenuating circumstances and suggestions for improvement where the need for improvement seems to be indicated. Anyone can have a "bad" class or a "bad" term. The teacher who is aware of these, however, and can make appropriate suggestions concerning how to correct such situations, in the long run is probably an effective teacher. (And evaluation should cover the long run, that is, include many terms and not be limited to the fall term of the year a tenure decision must be made.)

Advantage

1. There are some things which only the instructor knows, or remains aware of. There may have been something unique which influenced a given course which would not be covered by a standardized approach. Self evaluation may be the only way to insure that such information is included in the total evaluation.

Disadvantage

1. Self evaluations can be very subjective and biased because it is very difficult to be objective about oneself, especially if some important decision is at stake.

Systematic Student Ratings. Although the importance attached to such ratings varies considerably, they are widely used by institutions of higher education. They have been researched more than any other source of information about teaching effectiveness. See reviews of the literature by Costin, Greenough, and Menges [2], by Kulik and McKeachie [4], and by Menges [6].

Advantages

1. Students typically observe more of the instructor's teaching than is ever possible for colleagues or department heads. The students have a global picture of the course. Further, observations by many students are typically obtained.

2. Since the students have already observed the instructor and have probably given some thought to his or her effectiveness, the only additional effort required is in obtaining their ratings. Often students can do this in fifteen or twenty minutes.

3. The students are the people who are supposed to be learning, to ignore their opinion is to ignore the crucial people.

Disadvantages

1. The students are not subject matter experts. Although they can rate some things, for example, whether the instructor encourages questions; other judgments are beyond their competence, for example, how knowledgeable the instructor is of the academic discipline.

2. Student ratings can be influenced by the students' own characteristics and needs.

3. Most student rating forms are designed to evaluate traditional teaching approaches.

ACADEMIC ADVISEMENT

Interestingly, none of the studies reviewed earlier in this paper included effectiveness in academic advisement as a source of information about teaching effectiveness. Miller [7] does discuss it in his book, however. Most colleges and universities expect their instructors to provide some help outside of class to students taking their courses. Some information about this kind of assessment is often included on many student rating forms.

Many two-year and four-year undergraduate institutions, however, also expect their faculty members to provide significant academic, and often career, advisement to students not necessarily taking one of their courses. In order to obtain information about this teaching responsibility, some kind of survey or poll of the faculty member's advisees is required.

Advantages

1. Teaching (like learning) is not restricted to the classroom. There is no other direct way to obtain information about the quality of advisement than to ask the advisees.

2. At institutions where academic advising is considered important, including information about its effectiveness is a logical requisite.

Disadvantages

1. Obtaining systematic and complete information is difficult and time consuming.

2. Student use and assessment of academic advisement is often more dependent upon their needs and expectations than upon what the faculty member actually does. Many students do not see their advisor because they feel capable of making their own plans, not because they think the particular advisor is ineffective.

SOURCES WHICH SHOULD NOT BE USED

Although, obviously, any information which evaluators have can potentially influence their judgment, it is suggested that little importance be attached to the four sources of information described below for the reasons given.

Enrollment in Elective Courses. The reasoning behind using enrollment in elective courses to evaluate teaching effectiveness is the assumption that, if students take one course in a discipline and like it, they will be likely to enroll in another course in that discipline. There is some truth to this. But students enroll in such courses for other reasons; they may like the

discipline despite the instructor. Since the meaning of such enrollments is unclear, it is recommended that such enrollment figures not be used as a source of information to evaluate teaching effectiveness.

Grade Distributions. The rationale behind using grade distributions is not entirely clear. Often a normal distribution seems to be what the dean is looking for, neither too many F's nor too many A's. Student grades are subject to many influences, not the least of which are the students' efforts and abilities, as well as the variations among instructors regarding testing and examination procedures. Finally, there is an unresolved criterion problem; should the preferred distribution be a normal one, or all A's. (See Milton and Edgerby [8] for further discussion.) For these reasons grade distributions are considered a questionable source of information concerning teaching effectiveness.

Informal Student Opinions. Typically these take the form of complaints from students who come in to talk with the department head or dean. They are usually very negative, excepting an occasional very positive opinion. Such opinions, or any kind of unsystematic data, are rarely representative of the entire class and so they should not be used in any substantive way to evaluate teaching other than to point out areas where systematic information should be obtained.

Scholarly Research and Publication. Obviously research and publication are relevant sources of information to evaluate faculty performance at institutions where research is part of a faculty member's responsibility. Part of the folklore of higher education, however, postulates that the investigation of publishable research questions improves one's teaching.

The actual research on this question does not support this contention (see Linsky and Straus [5] for a recent study). Rather the research suggests that excellence in research and teaching effectiveness are essentially independent of one another. It should also be noted that the data do not support the conclusion that excellence in research detracts from teaching. Given the lack of relationship between research and teaching, research publications are not appropriate sources of information upon which to base judgments concerning teaching effectiveness.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It should be abundantly clear from the foregoing discussion that no single source of information can be unreservedly recommended as the basis for evaluating college teaching. But neither can higher education postpone the task until a problem-free source of information is developed. Teaching must be evaluated, and in fact has been evaluated for decades using sources far more "disadvantaged" than those discussed. So the question remains: How shall we evaluate college teaching?

Since there is no single source of information that is acceptable, it is strongly recommended that several sources be used to evaluate college teaching. These sources should be chosen so that in combination they provide accurate and valid information about all of the individual instructor's teaching responsibilities. A secondary criterion would be that the combination permit comprehensive coverage and with minimum of effort, which will still be considerable.

It would seem that the teaching responsibilities of most faculty members can be adequately covered using systematic student ratings, course portfolios,

opinions of colleagues and department heads, and self evaluations. For instructors with significant responsibilities for academic advisement, surveys of their advisees should be added.

If classroom teaching comprises the major portion of a faculty member's teaching, and usually it does, then the students in that class know more about how it is taught than anyone else ever can. Equally important, these students are the focus of the instructor's teaching efforts. Finally, this information can be obtained fairly efficiently.

The course portfolio is a second means to assess classroom teaching, but it permits the addition of something which the students cannot provide, professional judgments concerning the course, its accuracy, currentness, comprehensiveness, and the like.

Although classroom teaching may be the major teaching responsibility of a faculty member, it is not the only teaching responsibility. The opinions of colleagues and the department head are probably the most accurate and most easily obtained source of information concerning all of those extra-classroom teaching activities: course revision, development of new instructional approaches, curriculum planning, and contributions to the myriad of instructional committees on which most faculty members serve and about which the students know little, if anything.

Where academic advisement must be included, a systematic survey of the faculty member's advisees seems necessary. Only the advisees can provide the required information. Depending upon the number of advisees, not everyone need be surveyed, but care should be taken that responses are obtained from a representative sample of advisees. Advisees should be questioned about more than their satisfaction with the advisor. They should

also be asked to describe at least one sample of their experience so that a professional judgment can be made about the quality of the advisement; for example, about how accurate was the information which the faculty member supplied about an academic program outside of his or her discipline.

Finally, a self evaluation by the individual teacher, covering all of his or her major teaching responsibilities, should be included. This is necessary not only in fairness, to hear "both sides of the story," but for accuracy's sake; there are many unique, and sometimes significant circumstances, that only the individual faculty member can provide.

Suggesting the use of these four or five sources of information is not meant to imply that no other source of information be used, but these sources seem to provide acceptable coverage of a faculty member's teaching responsibilities with relatively minimal effort. When these various sources of information tend to lead to the same conclusions, evaluators may feel reasonably confident that they have an accurate picture of the faculty member's teaching upon which to base their decision. Where inconsistencies appear, the gathering of further information is indicated. For example, if systematic student ratings and peers' judgments based upon the course portfolio suggest different conclusions, some classroom visits may help to resolve the question. Where peer evaluations and self evaluation do not agree, it may be appropriate to interview the various parties.

No combination of even fifteen sources of information is likely to permit an automatic conclusion or decision about teaching effectiveness. It is highly improbably that any mechanical or quantitative treatment of the data will result in valid conclusions (at least without several years

of empirical testing). Ultimately someone will have to analyze and synthesize the information, and reason to an overall evaluation and decision. The point of this paper has not been to suggest eliminating such judgments, but rather to argue that we can vastly improve the sources of information upon which we base those judgments.

One final comment, readers may be tempted to laugh at such phrases as "relatively minimal effort" because the time required would still be tremendous. But what are the alternatives? Tenure has been said to be a half-million-dollar decision, if one totals up the faculty member's salary over the twenty or thirty years he or she might remain at the institution. Certainly such decisions warrant a comparable commitment of time. More importantly, given the potential impact on the faculty member's professional career, especially today, evaluation of teaching effectiveness merits a serious commitment from everyone involved in order to provide an accurate and fair assessment. Most importantly is a fact which tends to be overlooked when talking about evaluation. These procedures have the potential to help everyone; the evaluators as well as the evaluated. Evaluation of teaching has the potential to help all of us become more effective teachers.

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